

MAKING A DIFFERENCE – THE BRITISH AID GUEST HOUSE ASSOCIATION IN BANGLADESH

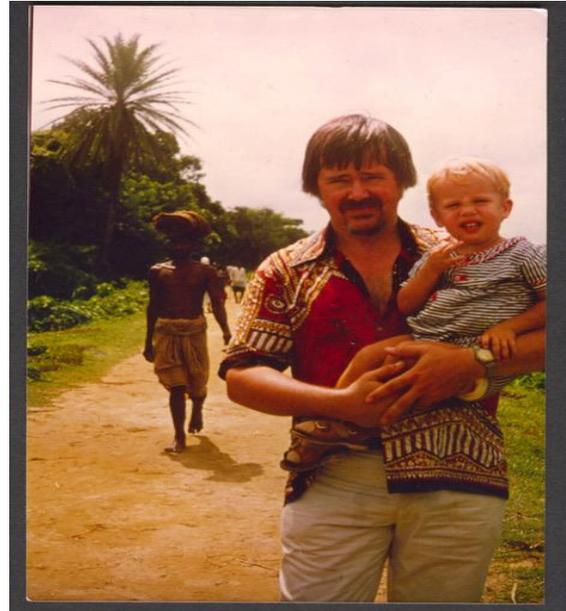
Geoff Williams, former ODA/DfID staffer and 1st Secretary(Aid) Dacca, Bangladesh 1978-81, who is grateful to Chris Austin, Mick McGill, and Jim McAlpine for information on BAGHA post 2010, and to Linda Williams, whose memory of some aspects of social affairs of the time is sharper than mine.

NB Terms and spellings are as in 1978

October 1978 and, in town, an Aid Review Mission composed of people from Bangkok DevDiv, the local Aid Section and South East Asia Department, London. Because the Asian under-20s football tournament was taking place in Dacca and the only two international hotels were fully booked, the majority of visitors was lodged with members of the Aid Section, just two of the visitors claiming a place of sorts in the Intercontinental. "Of sorts" indicates that the senior visitor from London was in a rarely-used room next to the boiler-room, sleeping on a chaise longue rather than a regular bed. That may have helped concentrate the mind on the paucity of facilities both for visitors and, to a greater extent possibly, locally resident ODA-contracted staff, known as Technical Co-operation Officers (TCOs).

Two years earlier the then Prime Minister Jim Callaghan had announced a pledge of \$US 300-500 to Bangladesh and the emergent programme was heavy in advisory assistance for projects and programmes large and small. As an illustration, Dacca Power, bringing mains power to the whole city, enjoyed a consultancy attachment of seventeen, all funded by ODA, their housing and transport supplied and administered by the British High Commission, but not in the control of the Aid Section, which had to rely on BHC Admin for the allocation of houses. ODA 'came second' in this allocation, even if the cost had been ascribed to ODA. This meant new arrivals staying in hotels – hardly encouraging for those with young families – and often, after pressure had been applied, being assigned properties not fully finished, eg absence of aid condition in a climate which for six months

was 90F 90% humidity, The total number of TCOs/consultants was already in the high thirties and due to rise to fifty at the beginning of 1979. (Eventually, it was envisaged that there would be 100, but the incoming Prime Minister's restrictions on aid expenditure halted that expansion, mercifully one might be tempted to say.)



So, problems in permanent accommodation for new resident TCO's and their families, and on the lack of individual vehicles, exacerbated by industrial unrest in the UK, specifically at Land Rover on which company the programme was heavily dependent for its successful implementation. Additionally, there were almost no recreational facilities. A small BHC Club had been declared by its committee to be full to bursting because of the influx of tco's, and the membership had become restricted to members of the Diplomatic Service and 20 existing tco members, leaving a dozen or more tco's frozen out, and their number scheduled at least to double. And, as already illustrated in the opening paragraph, visitors from London and Bangkok could not be guaranteed international standards of hotel comfort, nor could tco's visiting Dacca from up-country. Cinemas showed only films in Hindi or Bangla, and the one TV channel had one English-language programme per day. Aid personnel thus relied on Donors' clubs and the new arrivals could only use them by invitation.

Something radical was required. The visiting mission offered the chance in its margins of a last try at convincing the BHC to ease restrictions at their club. Result: take a couple of heads and try banging them hard against a brick wall. No movement, but the boss, possibly inspired by his

uncomfortable accommodation (as above), did get an assurance that the BHC would be supportive of an independent venture in terms of equipping a building – at ODA cost, of course -and including it on the Diplomatic Establishment, a vital protection against casual interference from local authorities. The then High Commissioner himself was extremely supportive and became the first Patron of the eventual club. As Head of the Aid Section I was instructed immediately after the meeting described above to acquire a property that could provide short-stay accommodation for visitors and also offer club facilities to long-term resident aid personnel. A suitable property came up very quickly because landlords in the suburb of Gulshan were keen to have their properties rented by regular payers, and that meant Aid Donors, of whom the Western ones were long established in the area. We were able to specify the configuration of both floors, fitting in five upstairs en-suites and, on the lower level, a games room, play room for kids, kitchen and bar. One of the downstairs rooms also served as a one-day-a-week cinema. We got Eamonn Taylor from the Bangladesh desk in London to return from his leave-relief posting in Kathmandu via Dacca, so that he could give the boss a first-hand assurance that the chosen property should prove viable. Meanwhile we established a committee to draw up a constitution and oversee the administration of the club, with me in the Chair and another member of the Aid Section monitoring day-to-day progress.



The pool at the property raised a couple of potential problems. First, and most important, we would need a filter which would involve capital we did not yet have and almost certainly months of procurement, transportation and snail-like movement through the labyrinth of Bangladeshi

import rules. Step forward Bill Hodgkinson, a consultant on road improvement, with a blueprint for an appropriate-technology filter which at this distance I can only describe as a concrete box containing stones and different sands. It failed just once in three years, but had the merit of being adjustable in a matter of hours, rather than the weeks that replacement parts of mechanical equipment might have required. The second issue concerned the diving boards which the landlord had already installed before we first saw the property. The highest was somewhere around 5 metres, an automatic challenge for brave (very) young souls and a heart-stopper for their mums. Some went as far as to suggest its dismantling, but it was solid concrete rather than removable iron poles, so it became a matter of sensible close surveillance and, occasionally roping off the top board. There were no accidents.



The pool and boards had clearly been designed by someone unaccustomed to leisure swimming/diving because the deep end of the pool was, well, DEEP, and the 'shallow' end was OK for anyone over about 5'3". Where were the weenies going to splash about? Answer: construct a mini-pool at one side of the main one.

The arrangement for the supply of alcoholic drinks to the bar involved voluntary contributions by all with a "Pass Book" to the Government Duty-free Warehouse. Duty-paid drinks could also be purchased at one authorised outlet. There were occasional alarms about supplies running low, but never an actual drought. Prices were set to cover all the running costs of BAGHA, plus a respectable surplus for purchase of capital items. A traditional 'colonial' system of chits to pay for drinks and food featured an outline drawing of the diving boards, which, in relief, looked very much like a cockroach,

a resonant image for Dacca's most populous insect.

To the chagrin of the younger, fitter blades among the membership there was no room to build a squash court without, that is, sacrificing most of the garden and even less chance of laying a tennis court. But we did have recreational value in the form of the pool, cinema and a somewhat squeezed badminton court, for aid personnel living in Dacca, and, of course, the upstairs accommodation put new arrivals and visitors much nearer to their BHC contacts.

The club was officially opened by the High Commissioner, Stephen Miles, on 27 February 1979 and it is fair to say was an instant success. So much so that members of the British High Commission Club could not help but learn that BAGHA had better facilities. Harold MacMillan used to warn that the firmest plans could be blown off-course by "events, dear boy, events" and a few months after BAGHA's opening something went seriously wrong with the BHCC pool, involving its closure for several months, just as a squadron of visiting schoolchildren was scheduled to arrive for a long summer hols. It concentrated the minds of those who had been opposed to absorbing any new aid personnel, and BHCC asked for a system of reciprocity to be introduced. This was rapidly approved, satisfying BHCC's short-term need while also providing access for BAGHA members to the BHCC tennis court and, once repaired, a more suitable pool for smaller children – and some adults! In due course, limited access to a squash court became available via a deal with the Swedish club whose members could attend our cinema nights.

All well and good, but there was still a constituency which felt left out in the cold, and said so loud and clear to their UK MPs; they were the British citizens working for International Agencies. Our response was to absorb them into BAGHA as very much aid professionals, meaning they would have reciprocal access to BHCC. This left a very small group of British business folk, whom the BHCC felt they could absorb without the building bursting its walls.

We were able to report to ODA that in BAGHA's first year the savings on hotel expenses met our initial outlay for the rent and running expenses. At a difficult time for working up and implementing aid projects in Bangladesh this administrative project had become our most successful. It went from strength to strength, and, upon the expiry of the initial lease in mid-Gulshan was able to move

to a larger building and grounds at the North end of Gulshan, where there more rooms for accommodation, a library and areas suitable for meetings, plus – the Golden Fleece – both squash and tennis courts.

In due time, membership expanded again to include British contractors, E.g. in the textile factories. In the early 2000's a number of small commercial hotels had been established by Bangladesh entrepreneurs, and senior members of the Aid Management Office (DfID) were uncomfortable at taking away business from these places. And so BAGHA stopped offering accommodation to new arrivals and aid visitors. The logic is easy to follow, but what was sacrificed was a real benefit of interchange of information/ideas between those staying in BAGHA. [Personal note: I rather enjoyed politely correcting the impressions of some members of the Development Select Committee when we were all staying in BAGHA during one of my post-retirement consultancy assignments.]

Over time different High Commissioners have taken different attitudes on the club having a Diplomatic personality, and I believe Bangladeshi officials, at regular intervals, also pressed for a change of status. BAGHA, however, has survived, and now in its third location back in mid-Gulshan, two blocks from the original, is reported as being an independent going concern, and very much the gathering place for visiting Brits.

